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Modernist Revolutions: American Poetry and the Paradigm of the New

Anca Cristofovici & Barbara Montefalcone: Hands-on / Hands-Off

Susan Barbour



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REFERENCES

Hands-on / Hands-Off, The Art of Collaboration: Poets, Artists, Books, Eds. Anca Cristofovici & Barbara Montefalcone, Cuneiform Press, 2015, 205 pages, ISBN 978-0-9860040-5-6, \$40

- 1 In 1994 the book artist and theorist Johanna Drucker published the groundbreaking study *A Century of Artist Books*, in which she describes the important tradition of books that sit at the intersection of text and artwork. Unlike the *livre d'artiste*, or illustrated book, the artist book blurs the binary of text and image. It calls attention to the book's material aspects as well as its various stages of production. It also interrogates the concept of "bookness," reflexively commenting upon the structure and meaning of its form. Makers of artist books often come from backgrounds in the visual arts (such as Marcel Duchamp and his *Green Box*, for example) or poetry (such as the works of William Hogarth and the Kelmscott Press).
- 2 Now, some twenty-two years later and in spite or because of the prevalence of the digital book, the genre continues to captivate us. Artist books challenge established binaries across the disciplines of art and literature. In so doing, they trouble our practiced modes of interpreting texts and drawings, a difference that exists largely because of the dematerializing tendency of the mechanical reproduction of texts. Indeed, it is only since the Gutenberg Press that writing has been construed as a discrete series of words, an immaterial phenomenon capable of taking on many different material forms. To an ancient Greek, who had but one word (*graphesis*) for "drawing" and "writing," the text/image binary of our current day would have been beyond understanding. Artist books rematerialize language and force us to look at text as image, an activity that reveals additional layers of meaning that exist beyond a

simple glossing of diction and syntax. In some instances where the artist book has been crafted by multiple individuals these books also trouble assumptions about authorship and intentionality.

- 3 *The Art of Collaboration: Poets, Artists, Books* is a compendium of fifteen papers from a symposium in Caen in 2011 that were devoted to such collaborative artist books. This event drew together poets, artists, scholars, independent publishers, and museum curators from France and the United States in effort to get a transatlantic perspective on the form. Barbara Montefalcone, one of the book's two editors and the symposium organizer, is the author of a book on Robert Creeley's collaborations. The talks here accordingly focus mostly on poets affiliated with the American avant-garde (Black Mountain College, The New York School, and LANGUAGE poetry) and their collaborations with visual artists. There is, however, a talk on the Bauhaus, and the second half of the book covers the all-important but often underappreciated perspective of publishers, curators, and librarians.
- 4 Conceptually, the book does readers a favor by drawing together a disparate array of perspectives not usually permitted in the same volume. As a result, however, there is a great range in the scope and style of the papers. Some talks read like off-hand notes to a slideshow while others are eloquently penned essays. So, while it is interesting to see these different perspectives juxtaposed here, the range feels uneven. The papers are also quite brief, about seven pages of text each, so one can't help but feel that the most fascinating discussions at the symposium happened *between* the papers—in the conversations that arose during coffee breaks, lunches, and Q&A sessions—where the experts from different fields were allowed to interact.
- 5 As the Introduction makes clear, this book admirably wants to address the hybrid nature of the artist book and disrupt ideological assumptions about how books mean. But, because its focus is on collaborations between poets and artists, there is a sense in which it takes it as a forgone conclusion that writers write and artists make pictures. Meanwhile, it seems to me that the most provocative examples of artist books have been from individuals who themselves instantiate a blurring of boundaries: from Hogarth to Duchamp to (to take a more recent example) the works of Jen Bervin. Still, while artist book collaborations may be a small sub-genre, readers will find significant examples discussed in this book's pages, often by notable experts. In "Why Frank O'Hara is not a painter," for example, poetry scholar Olivier Brossard observes how the disagreements and difficulties of O'Hara's collaborations dramatized the "radical otherness of writing to painting" (47). Collaborative works also prompt interesting questions about the social aspect of creation. Poet Bill Berkson writes beautifully about the two strategies of teamwork available to poets and artists in his essay "Hands On / Hands Off," a must-read for anyone interested in the process of collaborative authorship. Works of collaboration can arise from painstaking face-à-face dialogues; they may also be created asynchronously and over great distances. It is perhaps this latter type of artist book that leaves readers most baffled, wondering how to interpret works that seem haphazardly composed. But, as Berkson argues, such "parallel creations" represent "a period of style" (87). Poet and art-critic Raphael Rubenstein echoes this notion and hints at a fascinating kind of telepathy in the collaborative process when he writes of an artist finding his collaborator's writing to be "more predictive than descriptive" (108).

- 6 With the exception of these glimmering insights one craves greater depth of reflection on what these collaborative artist books accomplish formally or how such works change the way we read. Honing our awareness of what we *do* with books, the different cognitive modes we bring to them, ultimately informs us about the limitations and potentialities of how we have historically recorded and transmitted human knowledge. This seems to me the real reward of interacting with an artist book, a theme that one wished were more palpable here. An exception is Antoine Cazé's excellent essay "Charles Bernstein De/Signs, or Severe Typo's Ambiguity," which addresses the way Bernstein collaborates with his typewriter and illustrator Susan Bee to undermine transparency in language—a reading he acknowledges is largely indebted to Craig Dworkin's landmark work *Reading the Illegible* (1998). Also valuable in this regard are the papers by publishers and curators, such as Cuneiform Press's Kyle Schlesinger's, which serve as important reminders that *all* books are collaborations in that they involve the hands of editors, typesetters, and bookbinders.
- 7 But if there are shortcomings here it is the fault of the conference paper genre and not the editors or presenters themselves. There can be no doubt that this volume brings together an important set of perspectives on a timely topic. Readers who are interested in Black Mountain poets and artists, the Bauhaus, the New York School, LANGUAGE poets, and the San Francisco Bay Area poets will surely find rich anecdotes relevant to their research here. And anyone interested in the twentieth and twenty-first century artist book as a collaborative project will do well to read this book cover to cover. It is, finally, a beautiful assembly of artist book images that will be a pleasing addition to the collection of any bibliophile.
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Subjects: Recensions

AUTHOR

SUSAN BARBOUR

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